



**MASSACHUSETTS
HEAD START ASSOCIATION**

August 11, 2020

Testimony to the Board of Early Education and Care

Dear Board Members:

I write to share testimony on behalf of the Massachusetts Head Start Association (MHSA). MHSA represents the 29 Head Start and Early Head Start Programs in the state that collectively serve more than 14,700 vulnerable young children from birth to age five and employ more than 4,000 staff. Head Start programs provide critical services to children and families including early education and care, health, mental health, and nutritional services, and comprehensive family support and parent education.

While the Covid-19 pandemic necessitated physical distancing, this did not mean emotional distancing: during this unprecedented time, our member programs flexibly retooled their services to strengthen their connection and engagement with children and families. Head Start programs across Massachusetts have worked nonstop throughout the Covid-19 pandemic to find creative and effective ways to continue to provide comprehensive services. Programs have continued to provide regular early education, mental health services, and family support through virtual platforms and individual, consistent check ins and sessions with Head Start families. Programs have provided emergency support and referrals, and delivered necessities to families including food, diapers, wipes, and formula. These strategic actions in a time of crisis again shows the passion, commitment, skill, and effectiveness of the Head Start workforce.

Early into the pandemic, the Office of Head Start ensured programs that it would continue funding their full grants whether the program was open for in-person services or not. This flexibility has allowed programs to creatively rethink their services and provide high-quality services to families virtually and through deliveries to their homes. EEC has not extended the same flexibilities. Instead of allowing programs to make their own decisions that best suit their community's and families' needs, EEC has held programs' fiscal feet to the fire by conditioning their continued subsidy payments on reopening in July, despite whether this was a safe and healthy environment for teachers and children. Without these subsidy payments, programs would have to layoff teachers and staff. Since reopening, Head Start programs have opened and temporarily closed dozens of classrooms due to potential Covid exposure from a child or teacher, adding to the extreme anxiety and fear amidst our staff. They are quite literally afraid for their lives. And yet, if programs want to continue to be able to make payroll, they must remain open.

Now as fall approaches, our educators and staff members see school district after school district choose hybrid or fully virtual education models. They watch as the Commonwealth offers districts the respect and flexibility to survey parents and teachers and make decisions that are right for their community. And then our teachers wake up in the morning and go to work in a classroom in which they feel exposed and unsafe, and unable to do their job in the way that they know is best for the children in their care. As one teacher from a Head Start program wrote, "if it isn't deemed safe for public school staff and children to return to school, it most certainly is



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illogical and unethical to require infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and early childhood staff members to physical return to school either.”

We ask that you rethink the reopening plan for EEC programs and continue subsidy payments and parent fees based on March funding levels through the fall. Please allow programs to make the best decisions for their communities like public schools have been allowed to do. We thank you for your consideration. If you have questions you may contact me at mhaimowitz@massheadstart.org or 413-270-0809.

Respectfully Submitted,

Michelle Haimowitz
Executive Director